

A GUIDE TO ENGLISH  
LITERATURE

AND

ESSAY ON GRAY

By MATTHEW ARNOLD

ON THE STUDY OF  
LITERATURE

By JOHN MORLEY

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A GUIDE TO ENGLISH LITERA-  
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# I

## A GUIDE TO ENGLISH LITERATURE

PEOPLE repeat, till one is almost tired of hearing it, the story of the French Minister of Instruction who took out his watch and said complacently to a foreigner, that at that moment, in all the public grammar-schools of France, all boys of the same class were saying the same lesson. In England the story has been eagerly used to disparage State-meddling with schools. I have never been able to see that it was in itself so very lamentable a thing that all these French boys should be saying the same lesson at

the same time. Everything, surely, depends upon what the lesson was. Once secure what is excellent to be taught, and you can hardly teach it with too much insistence, punctuality, universality. The more one sees of the young, the more one is struck with two things: how limited is the amount which they can really learn, how worthless is much of what goes to make up this amount now. Mr. Grant Duff, misled by his own accomplishments and intelligence, is, I am convinced, far too encyclopædic in his requirements from young learners. But the heart-breaking thing is, that what they *can* be taught and *do* learn is often so ill-chosen. "An apple has a stalk, peel, pulp, core, pips, and juice; it is odorous and opaque, and is used for making a pleasant drink called

cider." There is the pedant's fashion of using the brief lesson-time, the soon tired attention, of little children. How much, how far too much, of all our course of tuition, early and late, is of like value!

For myself, I lament nothing more in our actual instruction than its multiformity,—a multiformity, too often, of false direction and useless labour. I desire nothing so much for it as greater uniformity,—but uniformity in good. Nothing is taught well except what is known familiarly and taught often. The Greeks used to say: Δὲς ἢ τρὶς τὰ καλὰ,—Give us a fine thing two and three times over! And they were right.

In literature we have present, and waiting ready to form us, the best which has been thought and said in

the world. Our business is to get at this best and to know it well. But even to understand the thing we are dealing with, and to choose the best in it, we need a guide, a clue. The literature most accessible to all of us, touching us most nearly, is our own literature, English literature. To get at the best in English literature and to know that best well, nothing can be more helpful to us than a guide who will show us, in clear view, the growth of our literature, its series of productions, and their relative value. If such a guide is good and trustworthy, his instructions cannot be too widely brought into use, too diligently studied, too thoroughly fixed in the mind.

But to deserve such universal acceptance and such heedful attention our guide ought to have special qualifica-

tions. He ought to be clear. He ought to be brief, —as brief as is consistent with not being dry. For dry he must not be; but we should be made to feel, in listening to him, as much as possible of the power and charm of the literature to which he introduces us. His discourse, finally, ought to observe strict proportion and to observe strict sobriety. He should have one scale and should keep to it. And he should severely eschew all violence and exaggeration; he should avoid, in his judgments, even the least appearance of what is arbitrary, personal, fantastic.

Mr. Stopford Brooke has published a little book entitled *A Primer of English Literature*. I have read it with the most lively interest and pleasure. I have just been saying

how very desirable is a good guide to English literature, and what are a good guide's qualifications. Mr. Stopford Brooke seems to me to possess them all. True, he has some of them in a higher degree than others. He is never dry, never violent; but occasionally he might, I think, be clearer, shorter, in more perfect proportion, more thoroughly true of judgment. To say this is merely to say that in a most difficult task, that of producing a book to serve as a guide to English literature, a man does not reach perfection all at once. The great thing was to produce a primer so good as Mr. Stopford Brooke's. It is easy to criticise it when it has once been produced, easy to see how in some points it might have been made better. To produce it at all, so

good as it is, was not easy. On the whole, and compared with other workmen in the same field, Mr. Stopford Brooke has been clear, short, interesting, observant of proportion, free from exaggeration and free from arbitrariness. Yet with the book lying before one as a whole, one can see, I think, that with respect to some of these merits the work might be brought to a point of excellence higher than that at which it now stands. Mr. Stopford Brooke will not, I am sure, take it amiss if an attentive and gratified reader of his book, convinced of the great importance of what it attempts, convinced of its merits, desirous to see it in every one's hands,—he will not take it ill, I say, if such a reader asks his leave to go rapidly through the book with him, to point out what



seem imperfections, to suggest what might bring his book yet nearer towards the ideal of what such a book should be.

I will begin at the beginning, and will suggest that Mr. Stopford Brooke should leave out his first two pages, the pages in which he lays down what literature is, and what its two main divisions (as he calls them), prose and poetry, are. His primer is somewhat long, longer than most primers. It is a gain to shorten it by expunging anything superfluous. And the reader does not require to be told what literature is, and what prose and poetry are. For all practical purposes he knows this sufficiently well already. Or even if he were in doubt about it, Mr. Stopford Brooke's two pages would not

make the matter much clearer to him; they are a little embarrassed themselves, and tend to embarrass the attentive reader. And a primer, at any rate, should be above all things quite plain and clear; it should contain nothing to embarrass its reader, nothing not perfectly thought out and lucidly laid down. So I wish Mr. Stopford Brooke would begin his primer with what is now the fourth section: "The history of English literature is the story of what English men and women thought and felt, and then wrote down in good prose or beautiful poetry in the English language. The story is a long one. It begins about the year 670 and it is still going on in the year 1875. Into this little book, then, is to be put the story of 1,200 years." Nothing can be better.

The sentence which follows is questionable:—

“No people that have ever been in the world can look back so far as we English can to the beginnings of our literature; no people can point to so long and splendid a train of poets and prose-writers, no nation has on the whole written so much and so well.”

The first part of this sentence makes an assertion of very doubtful truth; the second part is too much to the tune of *Rule Britannia*. Both parts offend against sobriety. The four cardinal virtues which are, as I have said, to be required in the writer of a primer of English literature are these: clearness, brevity, proportion, sobriety. Sobriety needs to be insisted upon, perhaps, the most, because in things meant, and rightly meant, to be popular, there is such danger of

sinning against it. Anything of questionable and disputed truth, even though we may fairly hold it and in a longer performance might fairly lay it down and defend it, is out of place in a primer. It is an offence against sobriety to insert it there. And let Mr. Stopford Brooke ask himself what foreigner, or who except an Englishman, would admit that "no people can point to so long and splendid a train of poets and prose-writers as the English people, no nation has on the whole written so much and so well"? Nay, it is not every Englishman who, with Greece before his eyes, would admit it. What follows is in a truer strain, in the right strain for a guide to take:—

"Every English man and woman has good reason to be proud of the work done by their

forefathers in prose and poetry. Every one who can write a good book or a good song may say to himself: 'I belong to a great company which has been teaching and delighting men for more than a thousand years.' And that is a fact in which those who write and those who read ought to feel a noble pride."

This is unquestionable, and it is sufficient.

Nothing, in a task like Mr. Stopford Brooke's, is more difficult than the start, and it was natural, therefore, that his first page or two should be peculiarly open to criticism. Once started, Mr. Stopford Brooke proceeds safely and smoothly, and page after page is read with nothing but acquiescence. His first chapter is excellent, and has that great merit for which his primer is, as I have said, conspicuous: the merit of so touching men and works of which the young reader, and

the general reader, knows and can be expected to know very little, as to make them cease to be mere names; —as to give a real sense of their power and charm. His manner of dealing with Cædmon and Bede is a signal instance of this. I shall not quote the passage, because I wish to quote presently another passage with the like merit, in which Mr. Stopford Brooke is even happier: the passage where he treats of Chaucer.

In the second chapter there is in several places a want of clearness, due to a manner of writing which leaves something to be filled out and completed by the reader himself. This task should not be thrown upon readers of a primer. "The last memoranda of the Peterborough Chronicle

are of the year 1154, the last English Charter can scarcely be earlier than 1155." Mr. Stopford Brooke gives these words as a quotation, but it is not fully clear how they relate themselves to the context, or exactly what is to be deduced from them. In another instance, the want of clearness arises from an attempt to give a piece of information by the way, and because the piece of information seems to be a part of the argument, but is not. "The first friars were foreigners, and they necessarily used many French words in their English teaching, and Normans as well as English now began to write religious works in English." The point to be made out is that English came into greater use because even foreigners had for certain purposes to adopt it.

Mr. Stopford Brooke wishes to inform by the way his young reader, that the foreigners in doing so used many French words. But the manner in which he throws this in must cause puzzle; for the young reader imagines it to lead up somehow to the main point that English came into more general use, and it does not. Or the want of clearness arises from something being put forward, about which Mr. Stopford Brooke, after he has put it forward, feels hesitation. "The poem marks the close of the religious influence of the friars. They had been attacked before in a poem of 1320; but in this poem there is not a word said against them. It is true, the author living far in the country may not have been thrown much with them." Mr. Stopford Brooke means



here, so far as I understand him, to imply that there not being a word said against the friars in the poem in question marks the close of their religious influence. That is rather a subtle inference for a young reader to follow. Mr. Stopford Brooke, however, seems to feel (for I am really not quite sure that I understand him) that he may have been too subtle; and he adds: "It is true, the author living far in the country may not have been thrown much with them." That is to say: "If you consider the thing more subtly, perhaps you had better not make the inference I have suggested." A subtlety requiring immediately to be relieved by another subtlety, is rather too much for a young reader. The writer of a primer should attempt to convey nothing but what can be

conveyed in a quite plain and straightforward fashion.

But presently we come to Layamon's *Brut*, and here we see how admirably Mr. Stopford Brooke understands his business. It is not difficult to be dull in speaking of Layamon's *Brut*, or even in quoting from it. But what Mr. Stopford Brooke says of Layamon and his work is just what every one will feel interested in hearing of them; and what he quotes is exactly what will complete and enhance this feeling of interest:—

“‘There was a priest in the land,’ Layamon writes of himself, ‘whose name was Layamon; he was son of Leovenath; may the Lord be gracious unto him! He dwelt at Earnley, a noble church on the bank of Severn, near Radstone, where he read books. It came in mind to him and in his chiefest thought that

he would tell the noble deeds of England, what the men were named, and whence they came, who first had English land.'"

Freshness of touch, a treatment always the very opposite of the pedant's treatment of things, make the great charm of Mr. Stopford Brooke's work. He owes them, no doubt, to his genuine love for nature and poetry:—

"In 1300 we meet with a few lyric poems, full of charm. They sing of spring-time with its blossoms, of the woods ringing with the thrush and nightingale, of the flowers and the seemly sun, of country work, of the woes and joy of love, and many other delightful things."

No such secret of freshness as delight in all these "delightful things" and in the poetry which tells of them!

This second chapter, giving the

history of English literature from the Conquest to Chaucer, is admirably proportioned. The personages come in due order, the humblest not without his due word of introduction; the chief figures pause awhile and stand clear before us, each in his due degree of prominence. To do justice to the charm of Mr. Stopford Brooke's primer, let the reader turn to the pages on Chaucer. Something I must quote from them; I wish I could quote all!

"Chaucer's first and great delight was in human nature, and he makes us love the noble characters in his poems, and feel with kindness towards the baser and ruder sort. He never sneers, for he had a wide charity, and we can always smile in his pages at the follies and forgive the sins of men. He had a true and chivalrous regard for women, and his wife and he must have been very happy if they ful-

filled the ideal he had of marriage. He lived in aristocratic society, and yet he thought him the greatest gentleman who was 'most virtuous alway, Privé and pert (open), and most entendeth aye To do the gentil dedes that he can.' He lived frankly among men, and, as we have seen, saw many different types of men, and in his own time filled many parts as a man of the world and of business. Yet with all this active and observant life, he was commonly very quiet and kept much to himself. The Host in the Tales japes at him for his lonely, abstracted air. 'Thou lookest as thou wouldest find a hare, And ever on the ground I see thee stare.' Being a good scholar, he read morning and night alone, and he says that after his office-work he would go home and sit at another book as dumb as a stone, till his look was dazed. While at study and when he was making of songs and ditties, 'nothing else that God had made' had any interest for him. There was but one thing that roused him then, and that too he liked to enjoy alone. It was the beauty of the morning and the fields, the woods, the streams, the

flowers, and the singing of the little birds. This made his heart full of revel and solace, and when spring came after winter, he rose with the lark and cried, 'Farewell my book and my devotion.' He was the first who made the love of nature a distinct element in our poetry. He was the first who, in spending the whole day gazing alone on the daisy, set going that lonely delight in natural scenery which is so special a mark of our later poets. He lived thus a double life, in and out of the world, but never a gloomy one. For he was fond of mirth and good-living, and when he grew towards age was portly of waist, 'no poppet to embrace.' But he kept to the end his elfish countenance, the shy, delicate, half-mischievous face which looked on men from its grey hair and forked beard, and was set off by his light grey-coloured dress and hood. A knife and inkhorn hung on his dress, we see a rosary in his hand, and when he was alone he walked swiftly."

I could not bring myself to make the quotation shorter, although Mr. Stop-

ford Brooke may ask me, indeed, why I do not observe in a review the proportion which I demand in a primer.

The third and fourth chapters bring us to the Renaissance and the Elizabethan age. Spenser is touched by Mr. Stopford Brooke almost as charmingly as Chaucer. The pages on Shakspeare are full of interest, and the great poet gains by the mode in which we are led up to him. Mr. Stopford Brooke has remembered that Shakspeare is, as Goethe said, not truly seen when he is regarded as a great single mountain rising straight out of the plain; he is truly seen when seen among the hills of his *Riesen-Heimath*, his giant home, — among them, though towering high above them. Only one or two sentences I could

wish otherwise. Mr. Stopford Brooke says of Shakspeare's last plays:—

“All these belong to and praise forgiveness, and it seems, if we may conjecture, that looking back on all the wrong he had suffered and on all that he had done, Shakspeare could say in the forgiveness he gave to men and in the forgiveness he sought of heaven the words he had written in earlier days: *The quality of mercy is not strained.*”

Perhaps that might not be out of place in a volume of lectures on Shakspeare. But it is certainly somewhat far-fetched and fanciful;—too fanciful for our primer. Nor is it quite sound and sober criticism, again, to say of Shakspeare: “He was altogether, from end to end, an artist, and the greatest artist the modern world has known.” Or again: “In the unchangeableness of pure art-power Shakspeare stands entirely



alone." There is a peculiarity in Mr. Stopford Brooke's use of the words *art*, *artist*. He means by an artist one whose aim in writing is not to reveal himself, but to give pleasure; he says most truly that Shakspeare's aim was to please, that Shakspeare "made men and women whose dramatic action on each other and towards a catastrophe was intended to please the public, not to reveal himself." This is indeed the true temper of the artist. But when we call a man emphatically *artist*, a *great artist*, we mean something more than this temper in which he works; we mean by art, not merely an aim to please, but also, and more, a law of pure and flawless workmanship. As living always under the sway of *this* law, and as, therefore, a perfect artist,

we do not conceive of Shakspeare. His workmanship is often far from being pure and flawless.

"Till that Bellona's bridegroom, lapp'd in proof,  
Confronted him with self-comparisons — "

There is but one name for such writing as that, if Shakspeare had signed it a thousand times,— it is detestable. And it is too frequent in Shakspeare. In a book, therefore, where every sentence should be sure, simple, and solid, not requiring mental reservations nor raising questions, we ought not to speak of Shakspeare as "altogether, from end to end, an artist"; as "standing entirely alone in the unchangeableness of pure art-power." He is the richest, the most wonderful, the most powerful, the most delightful of poets; he is not altogether, nor even eminently, an artist.

In the fifth chapter we reach Milton. Mr. Stopford Brooke characterises Milton's poems well, when he speaks of "their majestic movement, their grand style, and their grave poetry." But I wonder at his designating Milton *our greatest poet*. Nor does the criticism of *Paradise Lost* quite satisfy me. I do not think that "as we read the great epic, we feel that the lightness and grace of Milton's youthful time are gone." True, the poet of *Paradise Lost* differs from the poet of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*; but the feeling raised by *Paradise Lost* is not a feeling that lightness and grace are gone. That would be a negative feeling, a feeling of disappointment; and the feeling raised by *Paradise Lost* is far other. Yet neither is it a feeling which justifies Mr. Stopford Brooke in

saying that "at last all thought and emotion centre round Adam and Eve, until the closing lines leave us with their lonely image in our minds." The personages have no growing, absorbing interest of this kind; when we finish the poem, it is not with our minds agitated by them and full of them. The power of *Paradise Lost* is to be sought elsewhere. Nor is it true to say that Milton "summed up in himself all the higher influences of the Renaissance." The disinterested curiosity, the *humanism* of the Renaissance, are not characteristics of Milton, — of Milton, that is to say, when he is fully formed and has taken his ply. Nor again can it rightly be said that Milton "began that pure poetry of natural description which has no higher examples to show in Words-

worth, or Scott, or Keats, than his *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*." *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* are charming, but they are not pure poetry of natural description in the sense in which the *Highland Reaper* is, or the *Ode to Autumn*. The poems do not touch the same chords or belong to the same order. Scott is altogether out of place in the comparison. His natural description in verse has the merits of his natural description in prose, which are very considerable. But it never has the grace and felicity of Milton, or the natural magic of Wordsworth and Keats. As poetical work, it is not to be even named with theirs.

Shakspeare and Milton are such prominent objects in a primer of English literature that one dwells on

them, strives to have them presented quite aright. After Milton we come to a century whose literature has no figures of this grandeur. The literary importance of the eighteenth century lies mainly in its having wrought out a revolution begun in the seventeenth, — no less a revolution than the establishment of what Mr. Stopford Brooke well calls "the second period of English prose, in which the style is easy, unaffected, moulded to the subject, and the proper words are put in their proper places." With his strong love of poetry, Mr. Stopford Brooke could not, perhaps, feel the same sympathy and delight in dealing with this prose century as in dealing with the times of Chaucer or Elizabeth. Still his account of its writers does not fail in interest, and is in general just. But

his arrangement is here not quite satisfactory. The periods of time covered by his chapters should be literary periods, not merely periods in political history. His sixth chapter has for its title: *From the Restoration to George III.* The period from the Restoration to George the Third is a period in political history only. George the Third has nothing to do with literature; his accession marks no epoch in our civilisation or in our literature, such as is marked by the Conquest or by the reign of Elizabeth. I wish that Mr. Stopford Brooke would change the title of this chapter, and make it: *From the Restoration to the Death of Pope and Swift.* Pope died in 1744, Swift in 1745. The following chapter should be: *From 1745 to the French Revolution.* The next and

last : *From the French Revolution to the Death of Scott.*

These are real periods in our literature. Mr. Stopford Brooke enumerates, at the beginning of his seventh chapter, causes which from the early part of the eighteenth century were at work to influence literature.

"The long peace after the accession of the House of Hanover had left England at rest and given it wealth. The reclaiming of waste tracts, the increased wealth and trade, made better communication necessary; and the country was soon covered with a network of highways. The leisure gave time to men to think and write; the quicker interchange between the capital and the country spread over England the literature of the capital, and stirred men everywhere to write. The coaching services and the post carried the new book and the literary criticism to the villages. Communication with the Continent



had increased during the peaceable times of Walpole."

By the middle of the century, by a time well marked by the death of Pope and Swift, these influences had been in operation long enough to form a second period in the eighteenth century, sufficiently distinguishable from the period of Addison and Pope, and lasting down to a period of far more decisive change, the period of the French Revolution.

Prose and poetry, within these periods, should not have each their separate chapter; it is unnecessary, and leads to some confusion. Sir Walter Scott is at present noticed in one of Mr. Stopford Brooke's chapters as a poet, in another as a prose writer. And the limits of each period should be observed; authors and works should

not be mentioned out of their order of date. At present Mr. Stopford Brooke mentions the *Rivals* and *School for Scandal* of Sheridan in his sixth chapter, a chapter which professes to go from the Restoration to the accession of George the Third. At the very beginning of the following chapter, which goes from 1760 to 1837, he introduces his mention of the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Post*, the *Herald*, and the *Times*, of the *Edinburgh*, and the *Quarterly Review*, and of *Blackwood's Magazine*. By being freed from all such defects in lucid and orderly arrangement, the primer would gain in clearness.

It would gain in brevity and proportion by ending with the death of Scott in 1832. I wish I might prevail upon Mr. Stopford Brooke to bring his

primer to an end with Scott's death in that year. I wish he would leave out every word about his contemporaries, and about publications which have appeared since 1832. The death of Sir Walter Scott is a real epoch; it marks the end of one period and the beginning of another,—of the period in which we are ourselves now living. No man can trust himself to speak of his own time and his own contemporaries with the same sureness of judgment and the same proportion as of times and men gone by; and in a primer of literature we should avoid, so far as we can, all hindrances to sureness of judgment and to proportion. The readers of the primer, also, are not likely to hear too little of contemporary literature, if its praises are unrehearsed in their primer; they are

certain, under all circumstances, to hear quite enough of it, probably too much.

"Charlotte Brontë revived in *Jane Eyre* the novel of Passion, and Miss Yonge set on foot the religious novel in support of a special school of theology. Miss Martineau and Mr. Disraeli carried on the novel of political opinion and economy, and Charles Kingsley applied the novel to the social and theological problems of our own day."

Let Mr. Stopford Brooke make a clean sweep of all this, I entreat him. And if his date of 1832 compels him to include Rogers and his poetry, let him give to them, not a third part of a page, but one line. I reckon that these reductions would shorten the last part of the primer by five pages. A little condensation in the judgments on Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley

would abridge it by another page; the omission of the first pages of the volume by two more. Our primer shortened by eight pages! no small gain in a work of this character.

The last three chapters of the book, therefore, I could wish recast, and one or two phrases in his criticism Mr. Stopford Brooke might perhaps revise at the same time. He says most truly of Addison that his *Spectator* "gave a better tone to manners and a gentler one to political and literary criticism." He says truly, too, of Addison's best papers: "No humour is more fine and tender; and, like Chaucer's, it is never bitter." He has a right to the conclusion, therefore, that "Addison's work was a great one, lightly done." But to say of Addison's style, that "in its varied

cadence and subtle ease it has never been surpassed," seems to me to be going a little too far. One could not say more of Plato's. Whatever his services to his time, Addison is for us now a writer whose range and force of thought are not considerable enough to make him interesting; and his style cannot equal in varied cadence and subtle ease the style of a man like Plato, because without range and force of thought all the resources of style, whether in cadence or in subtlety, are not and cannot be brought out.

Is it an entirely accurate judgment, again, on the poems of Gray and Collins, to call them "exquisite examples of perfectly English work wrought in the spirit of classic art"? I confess, this language seems to me to be too strong. Much as I admire

Gray, one feels, I think, in reading his poetry never quite secure against the false poetical style of the eighteenth century. It is always near at hand, sometimes it breaks in; and the sense of this prevents the security one enjoys with truly classic work, the fulness of pleasure, the cordial satisfaction.

“Thy joys no glittering female meets —”

or even things in the *Elegy*: —

“He gave to misery all he had — a tear;

He gain'd from Heaven ('twas all he wish'd)  
a friend —”

are instances of the sort of drawback I mean. And the false style, which here comes to the surface, we are never very far from in Gray. Therefore, to call his poems “exquisite examples of perfectly English work

wrought in the spirit of classic art" seems to me an exaggeration.

Mr. Stopford Brooke's Cowper is excellent, but again there seems to me to be some want of sobriety in the praise given. Philanthropy, no doubt, animated Cowper's heart and shows itself in his poetry. But it is too much to say of the apparition of Cowper and of his philanthropy in English poetry: "It is a wonderful change, a change so wonderful that it is like a new world. It is, in fact, the concentration into our retired poet's work of all the new thought upon the subject of mankind which was soon to take so fierce a form in Paris." Cowper, with his morbid religion and lumbering movement, was no precursor, as Mr. Stopford Brooke would thus make him, of Byron and Shelley. His true



praise is, that by his simple affections and genuine love of Nature he was a precursor of Wordsworth.

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Of Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature Mr. Stopford Brooke draws out, I think, a more elaborate account than we require in a primer. No one will be much helped by Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature, as a scheme in itself and disjoined from his poems. Nor shall we be led to enjoy the poems the more by having a philosophy of Nature abstracted from them and presented to us in its nakedness. Of the page and a quarter which Mr. Stopford Brooke has given to Wordsworth's philosophy of Nature, all might with advantage, perhaps, be dropped but this:—

"Nature was a person to Wordsworth, distinct from himself, and capable of being loved.

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He could brood on her character, her ways, her words, her life. Hence arose his minute and loving observation of her, and his passionate description of all her forms."

There might be some condensation, too, in the criticism of Byron as the poet of *Don Juan* and as the poet of Nature. But some touches in the criticism of Byron are admirable. "We feel naturally great interest in this strong personality, put before us with such obstinate power; but it wearies at last. *Finally it wearied himself.*" Or again: "It is his colossal power and the ease which comes from it, in which he resembles Dryden, that marks him specially." Nothing could be better.

On Shelley, also, Mr. Stopford Brooke has an excellent sentence. He says of his lyrics: "They form

together the most sensitive, the most imaginative, and the most musical, but the least tangible lyrical poetry we possess." But in the pages on Shelley, yet more than in those on Byron, condensation is desirable. Shelley is a most interesting and attractive personage; but in a work of the dimensions of this primer, neither his *Queen Mab*, nor his *Alastor*, nor his *Revolt of Islam*, nor his *Prometheus Unbound*, deserve the space which Mr. Stopford Brooke gives to them. And finally, as the sentence which I have last quoted is just a sentence of the right stamp for a primer, so a passage such as the following is just of the sort which is unsuitable:—

"Shelley wants the closeness of grasp of nature which Wordsworth and Keats had, but he had the power in a far greater degree than

they of describing a vast landscape melting into indefinite distance. In this he stands first among English poets, and is in poetry what Turner was in landscape painting. Along with this special quality of vastness his colour is as true as Scott's, but truer in this that it is full of half tones, while Scott's is laid out in broad yellow, crimson, and blue, in black and white."

Very clever, but also very fantastic; and at all events quite out of place in a primer!

Mr. Stopford Brooke will forgive me for my plain-speaking. It comes from my hearty esteem and admiration for his primer, and my desire to clear it of every speck and flaw, so that it may win its way into every one's hands. I hope he will revise it, and then I shall read it again with a fresh pleasure. But indeed, whether he revises it or no, I shall read it again: *δὲς ἡ τρὶς τὰ καλά.*



II

THOMAS GRAY





## II

### THOMAS GRAY<sup>1</sup>

JAMES BROWN, Master of Pembroke Hall at Cambridge, Gray's friend and executor, in a letter written a fortnight after Gray's death to another of his friends, Dr. Wharton of Old Park, Durham, has the following passage:—

"Everything is now dark and melancholy in Mr. Gray's room, not a trace of him remains there; it looks as if it had been for some time uninhabited, and the room bespoke for another inhabitant. The thoughts I have of him will last, and will be use-

<sup>1</sup> Prefixed to the Selection from Gray in Ward's *English Poets*, vol. iv. 1880.



ful to me the few years I can expect to live. He never spoke out, but I believe from some little expressions I now remember to have dropped from him, that for some time past he thought himself nearer his end than those about him apprehended."

*He never spoke out.* In these four words is contained the whole history of Gray, both as a man and as a poet. The words fell naturally, and as it were by chance, from their writer's pen; but let us dwell upon them, and press into their meaning, for in following it we shall come to understand Gray.

He was in his fifty-fifth year when he died, and he lived in ease and leisure, yet a few pages hold all his poetry; *he never spoke out* in poetry. Still, the reputation which he has

achieved by his few pages is extremely high. True, Johnson speaks of him with coldness and disparagement. Gray disliked Johnson, and refused to make his acquaintance; one might fancy that Johnson wrote with some irritation from this cause. But Johnson was not by nature fitted to do justice to Gray and to his poetry; this by itself is a sufficient explanation of the deficiencies of his criticism of Gray. We may add a further explanation of them which is supplied by Mr. Cole's papers. "When Johnson was publishing his *Life of Gray*," says Mr. Cole, "I gave him several anecdotes, *but he was very anxious as soon as possible to get to the end of his labours.*" Johnson was not naturally in sympathy with Gray, whose life he had to write, and when he wrote it

he was in a hurry besides. He did Gray injustice, but even Johnson's authority failed to make injustice, in this case, prevail. Lord Macaulay calls the Life of Gray the worst of Johnson's Lives, and it had found many censurers before Macaulay. Gray's poetical reputation grew and flourished in spite of it. The poet Mason, his first biographer, in his epitaph equalled him with Pindar. Britain has known, says Mason,

“ . . . a Homer's fire in Milton's strains,  
A Pindar's rapture in the lyre of Gray.”

The immense vogue of Pope and of his style of versification had at first prevented the frank reception of Gray by the readers of poetry. The *Elegy* pleased; it could not but please: but Gray's poetry, on the whole, astonished his contemporaries at first more

than it pleased them; it was so unfamiliar, so unlike the sort of poetry in vogue. It made its way, however, after his death, with the public as well as with the few; and Gray's second biographer, Mitford, remarks that "the works which were either neglected or ridiculed by their contemporaries have now raised Gray and Collins to the rank of our two greatest lyric poets." Their reputation was established, at any rate, and stood extremely high, even if they were not popularly read. Johnson's disparagement of Gray was called "petulant," and severely blamed. Beattie, at the end of the eighteenth century, writing to Sir William Forbes, says: "Of all the English poets of this age Mr. Gray is most admired, and I think with justice." Cowper writes: "I have

been reading Gray's works, and think him the only poet since Shakspeare entitled to the character of sublime. Perhaps you will remember that I once had a different opinion of him. I was prejudiced." Adam Smith says: "Gray joins to the sublimity of Milton the elegance and harmony of Pope; and nothing is wanting to render him, perhaps, the first poet in the English language, but to have written a little more." And, to come nearer to our own times, Sir James Mackintosh speaks of Gray thus: "Of all English poets he was the most finished artist. He attained the highest degree of splendour of which poetical style seemed to be capable."

In a poet of such magnitude, how shall we explain his scantiness of production? Shall we explain it by

saying that to make of Gray a poet of this magnitude is absurd; that his genius and resources were small, and that his production, therefore, was small also, but that the popularity of a single piece, the *Elegy*,—a popularity due in great measure to the subject,—created for Gray a reputation to which he has really no right? He himself was not deceived by the favour shown to the *Elegy*. "Gray told me with a good deal of acrimony," writes Dr. Gregory, "that the *Elegy* owed its popularity entirely to the subject, and that the public would have received it as well if it had been written in prose." This is too much to say; the *Elegy* is a beautiful poem, and in admiring it the public showed a true feeling for poetry. But it is true that the *Elegy* owed much of its success to its sub-

ject, and that it has received a too unmeasured and unbounded praise.

Gray himself, however, maintained that the *Elegy* was not his best work in poetry, and he was right. High as is the praise due to the *Elegy*, it is yet true that in other productions of Gray he exhibits poetical qualities even higher than those exhibited in the *Elegy*. He deserves, therefore, his extremely high reputation as a poet, although his critics and the public may not always have praised him with perfect judgment. We are brought back, then, to the question: How, in a poet so really considerable, are we to explain his scantiness of production?

Scanty Gray's production, indeed, is; so scanty that to supplement our knowledge of it by a knowledge of the

man is in this case of peculiar interest and service. Gray's letters and the records of him by his friends have happily made it possible for us thus to know him, and to appreciate his high qualities of mind and soul. Let us see these in the man first, and then observe how they appear in his poetry; and why they cannot enter into it more freely and inspire it with more strength, render it more abundant.

We will begin with his acquirements. "Mr. Gray was," writes his friend Temple, "perhaps the most learned man in Europe. He knew every branch of history both natural and civil; had read all the original historians of England, France, and Italy; and was a great antiquarian. Criticism, metaphysics, morals, politics, made a principal part of his



study. Voyages and travels of all sorts were his favourite amusements; and he had a fine taste in painting, prints, architecture, and gardening." The notes in his interleaved copy of Linnæus remained to show the extent and accuracy of his knowledge in the natural sciences, particularly in botany, zoölogy, and entomology. Entomologists testified that his account of English insects was more perfect than any that had then appeared. His notes and papers, of which some have been published, others remain still in manuscript, give evidence, besides, of his knowledge of literature ancient and modern, geography and topography, painting, architecture and antiquities, and of his curious researches in heraldry. He was an excellent musician. Sir James Mackintosh reminds us,

moreover, that to all the other accomplishments and merits of Gray we are to add this: "That he was the first discoverer of the beauties of nature in England, and has marked out the course of every picturesque journey that can be made in it."

Acquirements take all their value and character from the power of the individual storing them. Let us take, from amongst Gray's observations on what he read, enough to show us his power. Here are criticisms on three very different authors, criticisms without any study or pretension, but just thrown out in chance letters to his friends. First, on Aristotle: —

"In the first place he is the hardest author by far I ever meddled with. Then he has a dry conciseness that makes one imagine one is perusing a table of contents rather than a

book; it tastes for all the world like chopped hay, or rather like chopped logic; for he has a violent affection to that art, being in some sort his own invention; so that he often loses himself in little trifling distinctions and verbal niceties, and what is worse, leaves you to extricate yourself as you can. Thirdly, he has suffered vastly by his transcribers, as all authors of great brevity necessarily must. Fourthly and lastly, he has abundance of fine, uncommon things, which make him well worth the pains he gives one. You see what you have to expect."

Next, on Isocrates:—

"It would be strange if I should find fault with you for reading Isocrates; I did so myself twenty years ago, and in an edition at least as bad as yours. The Panegyric, the De Pace, Areopagitic, and Advice to Philip, are by far the noblest remains we have of this writer, and equal to most things extant in the Greek tongue; but it depends on your judgment to distinguish between his real and occasional

opinion of things, as he directly contradicts in one place what he has advanced in another; for example, in the Panathenaic and the De Pace, on the naval power of Athens; the latter of the two is undoubtedly his own undisguised sentiment."

After hearing Gray on Isocrates and Aristotle, let us hear him on Froissart:

"I rejoice you have met with Froissart, he is the Herodotus of a barbarous age; had he but had the luck of writing in as good a language, he might have been immortal. His locomotive disposition (for then there was no other way of learning things), his simple curiosity, his religious credulity, were much like those of the old Grecian. When you have *tant chevauché* as to get to the end of him, there is Monstrelet waits to take you up, and will set you down at Philip de Commines; but previous to all these, you should have read Villehardouin and Joinville."

Those judgments, with their true and clear ring, evince the high quality

of Gray's mind, his power to command and use his learning. But Gray was a poet; let us hear him on a poet, on Shakspeare. We must place ourselves in the full midst of the eighteenth century and of its criticism. Gray's friend, West, had praised Racine for using in his dramas "the language of the times and that of the purest sort"; and he had added: "I will not decide what style is fit for our English stage, but I should rather choose one that bordered upon Cato, than upon Shakspeare." Gray replies:—

"As to matter of style, I have this to say: The language of the age is never the language of poetry; except among the French, whose verse, where the thought does not support it, differs in nothing from prose. Our poetry, on the contrary, has a language peculiar to

itself, to which almost every one that has written has added something. In truth, Shakspeare's language is one of his principal beauties; and he has no less advantage over your Addisons and Rowes in this, than in those other great excellences you mention. Every word in him is a picture. Pray put me the following lines into the tongue of our modern dramatics —

“‘ But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,  
Nor made to court an amorous looking-  
glass ’ —

and what follows? To me they appear untranslatable; and if this be the case, our language is greatly degenerated.”

It is impossible for a poet to lay down the rules of his own art with more insight, soundness, and certainty. Yet at that moment in England there was perhaps not one other man, besides Gray, capable of writing the passage just quoted.

Gray's quality of mind, then, we see; his quality of soul will no less bear inspection. His reserve, his delicacy, his distaste for many of the persons and things surrounding him in the Cambridge of that day,—“this silly, dirty place,” as he calls it,—have produced an impression of Gray as being a man falsely fastidious, finical, effeminate. But we have already had that grave testimony to him from the Master of Pembroke Hall: “The thoughts I have of him will last, and will be useful to me the few years I can expect to live.” And here is another to the same effect from a younger man, from Gray's friend Nicholls:—

“You know,” he writes to his mother, from abroad, when he heard of Gray's death, “that I considered Mr. Gray as a second parent,

that I thought only of him, built all my happiness on him, talked of him for ever, wished him with me whenever I partook of any pleasure, and flew to him for refuge whenever I felt any uneasiness. To whom now shall I talk of all I have seen here? Who will teach me to read, to think, to feel? I protest to you, that whatever I did or thought had a reference to him. If I met with any chagrins, I comforted myself that I had a treasure at home; if all the world had despised and hated me, I should have thought myself perfectly recompensed in his friendship. There remains only one loss more; if I lose you, I am left alone in the world. At present I feel that I have lost half of myself."

Testimonies such as these are not called forth by a fastidious effeminate weakling; they are not called forth, even, by mere qualities of mind; they are called forth by qualities of soul. And of Gray's high qualities of soul, of his *σπουδαίότης*, his excellent serious-



ness, we may gather abundant proof from his letters. Writing to Mason who had just lost his father, he says:—

“I have seen the scene you describe, and know how dreadful it is; I know too I am the better for it. We are all idle and thoughtless things, and have no sense, no use in the world any longer than that sad impression lasts; the deeper it is engraved the better.”

And again, on a like occasion to another friend:—

“He who best knows our nature (for he made us what we are) by such afflictions recalls us from our wandering thoughts and idle merriment, from the insolence of youth and prosperity, to serious reflection, to our duty, and to himself; nor need we hasten to get rid of these impressions. Time (by appointment of the same Power) will cure the smart and in some hearts soon blot out all the traces of sorrow; but such as preserve them longest (for it is partly left in our own power) do perhaps best acquiesce in the will of the chastiser,”

And once more to Mason, in the very hour of his wife's death; Gray was not sure whether or not his letter would reach Mason before the end: —

"If the worst be not yet past, you will neglect and pardon me; but if the last struggle be over, if the poor object of your long anxieties be no longer sensible to your kindness or to her own sufferings, allow me, at least an idea (for what could I do, were I present, more than this?), to sit by you in silence and pity from my heart not her, who is at rest, but you, who lose her. May he, who made us, the Master of our pleasures and of our pains, support you! Adieu."

Seriousness, character, was the foundation of things with him; where this was lacking he was always severe, whatever might be offered to him in its stead. Voltaire's literary genius charmed him, but the faults of Voltaire's nature he felt so strongly that

when his young friend Nicholls was going abroad in 1771, just before Gray's death, he said to him: "I have one thing to beg of you which you must not refuse." Nicholls answered: "You know you have only to command; what is it?"—"Do not go to see Voltaire," said Gray; and then added: "No one knows the mischief that man will do." Nicholls promised compliance with Gray's injunction; "But what," he asked, "could a visit from me signify?"—"Every tribute to such a man signifies," Gray answered. He admired Dryden, admired him, even, too much; had too much felt his influence as a poet. He told Beattie "that if there was any excellence in his own numbers he had learned it wholly from that great poet"; and

writing to Beattie afterwards he recurs to Dryden, whom Beattie, he thought, did not honour enough as a poet: "Remember Dryden," he writes, "and be blind to all his faults." Yes, his faults as a poet; but on the man Dryden, nevertheless, his sentence is stern. Speaking of the Poet-Laureateship, "Dryden," he writes to Mason, "was as disgraceful to the office from his character, as the poorest scribbler could have been from his verses. Even where crying blemishes were absent, the want of weight and depth of character in a man deprived him, in Gray's judgment, of serious significance. He says of Hume: "Is not that *naïveté* and good-humour, which his admirers celebrate in him, owing to this, that he has continued all his days an infant, but one that has

unhappily been taught to read and write?"

And with all this strenuous seriousness, a pathetic sentiment, and an element, likewise, of sportive and charming humour. At Keswick, by the lakeside on an autumn evening, he has the accent of the *Réveries*, or of Obermann, or Wordsworth:—

"In the evening walked down alone to the lake by the side of Crow Park after sunset and saw the solemn colouring of light draw on, the last gleam of sunshine fading away on the hill-tops, the deep serene of the waters, and the long shadows of the mountains thrown across them, till they nearly touched the hithermost shore. At distance heard the murmur of many waterfalls, not audible in the daytime. Wished for the Moon, but she was *dark to me and silent, hid in her vacant interlunar cave.*"

Of his humour and sportiveness his delightful letters are full; his humour

appears in his poetry too, and is by no means to be passed over there. Horace Walpole said that "Gray never wrote anything easily but things of humour; humour was his natural and original turn."

Knowledge, penetration, seriousness, sentiment, humour, Gray had them all; he had the equipment and endowment for the office of poet. But very soon in his life appear traces of something obstructing, something disabling; of spirits failing, and health not sound; and the evil increases with years. He writes to West in 1737:—

"Low spirits are my true and faithful companions; they get up with me, go to bed with me, make journeys and returns as I do; nay, and pay visits and will even affect to be jocose and force a feeble laugh with me; but most commonly we sit alone together, and are the prettiest insipid company in the world,"

The tone is playful, Gray was not yet twenty-one. "Mine," he tells West four or five years later, "mine, you are to know, is a white Melancholy, or rather *Leucocholy*, for the most part; which, though it seldom laughs or dances, nor ever amounts to what one calls joy or pleasure, yet is a good easy sort of a state." But, he adds in this same letter:—

"But there is another sort, black indeed, which I have now and then felt, that has something in it like Tertullian's rule of faith, *Credo quia impossibile est*; for it believes, nay, is sure of everything that is unlikely, so it be but frightful; and on the other hand excludes and shuts its eyes to the most possible hopes, and everything that is pleasurable; from this the Lord deliver us! for none but he and sunshiny weather can do it."

Six or seven years pass, and we find

him writing to Wharton from Cambridge thus:—

“The spirit of laziness (the spirit of this place) begins to possess even me, that have so long declaimed against it. Yet has it not so prevailed, but that I feel that discontent with myself, that *ennui*, that ever accompanies it in its beginnings. Time will settle my conscience, time will reconcile my languid companion to me; we shall smoke, we shall tipple, we shall doze together, we shall have our little jokes, like other people, and our long stories. Brandy will finish what port began; and, a month after the time, you will see in some corner of a London Evening Post, ‘Yesterday died the Rev. Mr. John Gray, Senior-Fellow of Clare Hall, a facetious companion, and well-respected by all who knew him.’ ”

The humorous advertisement ends, in the original letter, with a Hogarthian touch which I must not quote. Is it Leucocholy or is it Melancholy



which predominates here? at any rate, this entry in his diary, six years later, is black enough:—

*"Insomnia crebra, atque expergiscenti surdus quidam doloris sensus; frequens etiam in regione sterni oppressio, et cardialgia gravis, fere sempiterna."*

And in 1757 he writes to Hurd:—

"To be employed is to be happy. This principle of mine (and I am convinced of its truth) has, as usual, no influence on my practice. I am alone, and *ennuyé* to the last degree, yet do nothing. Indeed I have one excuse; my health (which you have so kindly inquired after) is not extraordinary. It is no great malady, but several little ones, that seem brewing no good to me."

From thence to the end his languor and depression, though still often relieved by occupation and travel, keep fatally gaining on him. At last

the depression became constant, became mechanical. "Travel I must," he writes to Dr. Wharton, "or cease to exist. Till this year I hardly knew what *mechanical* low spirits were; but now I even tremble at an east wind." Two months afterwards he died.

What wonder, that with this troublous cloud throughout the whole term of his manhood, brooding over him and weighing him down, Gray, finely endowed though he was, richly stored with knowledge though he was, yet produced so little, found no full and sufficient utterance, "*never*," as the Master of Pembroke Hall said, "*spoke out*." He knew well enough, himself, how it was with him.

"My *verve* is at best, you know" (he writes to Mason), "of so delicate a constitution, and has such weak

nerves, as not to stir out of its chamber above three days in a year." And to Horace Walpole he says: "As to what you say to me civilly, that I ought to write more, I will be candid, and avow to you, that till fourscore and upward, whenever the humour takes me, I will write; because I like it, and because I like myself better when I do so. If I do not write much, it is because I cannot." How simply said, and how truly also! Fain would a man like Gray speak out if he could, he "likes himself better" when he speaks out; if he does not speak out, "it is because I cannot."

Bonstetten, that mercurial Swiss who died in 1832 at the age of eighty-seven, having been younger and livelier from his sixtieth year to his eightieth than at any other time in

his life, paid a visit in his early days to Cambridge, and saw much of Gray, to whom he attached himself with devotion. Gray, on his part, was charmed with his young friend; "I never saw such a boy," he writes; "our breed is not made on this model." Long afterwards Bonstetten published his reminiscences of Gray. "I used to tell Gray," he says, "about my life and my native country, but *his* life was a sealed book to me; he never would talk of himself, never would allow me to speak to him of his poetry. If I quoted lines of his to him, he kept silence like an obstinate child. I said to him sometimes: 'Will you have the goodness to give me an answer?' But not a word issued from his lips." *He never spoke out.* Bonstetten thinks that

Gray's life was poisoned by an unsatisfied sensibility, was withered by his having never loved; by his days being passed in the dismal cloisters of Cambridge, in the company of a set of monastic book-worms, "whose existence no honest woman ever came to cheer." Sainte-Beuve, who was much attracted and interested by Gray, doubts whether Bonstetten's explanation of him is admissible; the secret of Gray's melancholy he finds rather in the sterility of his poetic talent, "so distinguished, so rare, but so stunted"; in the poet's despair at his own unproductiveness.

But to explain Gray, we must do more than allege his sterility, as we must look further than to his reclusion at Cambridge. What caused his sterility? Was it his ill-health, his

hereditary gout? Certainly we will pay all respect to the powers of hereditary gout for afflicting us poor mortals. But Goethe, after pointing out that Schiller, who was so productive, was "almost constantly ill," adds the true remark that it is incredible how much the spirit can do, in these cases, to keep up the body. Pope's animation and activity through all the course of what he pathetically calls "that long disease, my life," is an example presenting itself signally, in Gray's own country and time, to confirm what Goethe here says. What gave the power to Gray's reclusion and ill-health to induce his sterility?

The reason, the indubitable reason as I cannot but think it, I have already given elsewhere. Gray, a born poet, fell upon an age of prose. He fell

upon an age whose task was such as to call forth in general men's powers of understanding, wit, and cleverness, rather than their deepest powers of mind and soul. As regards literary production, the task of the eighteenth century in England was not the poetic interpretation of the world, its task was to create a plain, clear, straightforward, efficient prose. Poetry obeyed the bent of mind requisite for the due fulfilment of this task of the century. It was intellectual, argumentative, ingenious; not seeing things in their truth and beauty, not interpretative. Gray, with the qualities of mind and soul of a genuine poet, was isolated in his century. Maintaining and fortifying them by lofty studies, he yet could not fully educe and enjoy them; the want of

a genial atmosphere, the failure of sympathy in his contemporaries, were too great. Born in the same year with Milton, Gray would have been another man; born in the same year with Burns, he would have been another man. A man born in 1608 could profit by the larger and more poetic scope of the English spirit in the Elizabethan age; a man born in 1759 could profit by that European renewing of men's minds of which the great historical manifestation is the French Revolution. Gray's alert and brilliant young friend, Bonstetten, who would explain the void in the life of Gray by his having never loved, Bonstetten himself loved, married, and had children. Yet at the age of fifty he was bidding fair to grow old, dismal, and torpid like the rest of us,



when he was roused and made young again for some thirty years, says M. Sainte-Beuve, by the events of 1789. If Gray, like Burns, had been just thirty years old when the French Revolution broke out, he would have shown, probably, productiveness and animation in plenty. Coming when he did, and endowed as he was, he was a man born out of date, a man whose full spiritual flowering was impossible. The same thing is to be said of his great contemporary, Butler, the author of the *Analogy*. In the sphere of religion, which touches that of poetry, Butler was impelled by the endowment of his nature to strive for a profound and adequate conception of religious things, which was not pursued by his contemporaries, and which at that time, and in that

atmosphere of mind, was not fully attainable. Hence, in Butler too, a dissatisfaction, a weariness, as in Gray; "great labour and weariness, great disappointment, pain and even vexation of mind." A sort of spiritual east wind was at that time blowing; neither Butler nor Gray could flower. *They never spoke out.*

Gray's poetry was not only stinted in quantity by reason of the age wherein he lived, it suffered somewhat in quality also. We have seen under what obligation to Dryden Gray professed himself to be—"if there was any excellence in his numbers, he had learned it wholly from that great poet." It was not for nothing that he came when Dryden had lately "embellished," as Johnson says, English poetry; had "found it brick and

left it marble." It was not for nothing that he came just when "the English ear," to quote Johnson again, "had been accustomed to the mellifluence of Pope's numbers, and the diction of poetry had grown more splendid." Of the intellectualities, ingenuities, personifications, of the movement and diction of Dryden and Pope, Gray caught something, caught too much. We have little of Gray's poetry, and that little is not free from the faults of his age. Therefore it was important to go for aid, as we did, to Gray's life and letters, to see his mind and soul there, and to corroborate from thence that high estimate of his quality which his poetry indeed calls forth, but does not establish so amply and irresistibly as one could desire.

For a just criticism it does, how-

ever, clearly establish it. The difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Dryden, Pope, and all their school, is briefly this: their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits, genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul. The difference between the two kinds of poetry is immense. They differ profoundly in their modes of language, they differ profoundly in their modes of evolution. The poetic language of our eighteenth century in general is the language of men composing *without their eye on the object*, as Wordsworth excellently said of Dryden; language merely recalling the object, as the common language of prose does, and then dressing it out with a certain smartness and brilliancy for the fancy and understanding. This is called

"splendid diction." The evolution of the poetry of our eighteenth century is likewise intellectual; it proceeds by ratiocination, antithesis, ingenious turns and conceits. This poetry is often eloquent, and always, in the hands of such masters as Dryden and Pope, clever; but it does not take us much below the surface of things, it does not give us the emotion of seeing things in their truth and beauty. The language of genuine poetry, on the other hand, is the language of one composing with his eye on the object; its evolution is that of a thing which has been plunged in the poet's soul until it comes forth naturally and necessarily. This sort of evolution is infinitely simpler than the other, and infinitely more satisfying; the same thing is true of the genuine poetic

language likewise. But they are both of them also infinitely harder of attainment; they come only from those who, as Emerson says, "live from a great depth of being."

Goldsmith disparaged Gray who had praised his *Traveller*, and indeed in the poem on the *Alliance of Education and Government* had given him hints which he used for it. In retaliation let us take from Goldsmith himself a specimen of the poetic language of the eighteenth century.

"No cheerful murmurs fluctuate in the gale"—

there is exactly the poetic diction of our prose century! rhetorical, ornate, —and, poetically, quite false. Place beside it a line of genuine poetry, such as the

"In cradle of the rude, imperious surge"

of Shakspeare; and all its falseness instantly becomes apparent.

Dryden's poem on the death of Mrs. Killigrew is, says Johnson, "undoubtedly the noblest ode that our language ever has produced." In this vigorous performance Dryden has to say, what is interesting enough, that not only in poetry did Mrs. Killigrew excel, but she excelled in painting also. And thus he says it:—

"To the next realm she stretch'd her sway,  
For Painture near adjoining lay—  
A plenteous province and alluring prey.  
A Chamber of Dependencies was framed  
(As conquerors will never want pretence  
When arm'd, to justify the offence),  
And the whole fief, in right of Poetry, she  
claim'd."

The intellectual, ingenious, superficial evolution of poetry of this school

could not be better illustrated. Place beside it Pindar's

*αἰὼν ἀσφαλῆς*

*οὐκ ἔγεντ' οὐτ' Αἰακίδα παρὰ Πηλεΐ,*

*οὔτε παρ' ἀντιθέῳ Κάδμῳ . . .*

"A secure time fell to the lot neither of Peleus the son of Æacus, nor of the godlike Cadmus; howbeit these are said to have had, of all mortals, the supreme of happiness, who heard the golden-snooded Muses sing,—on the mountain the one heard them, the other in seven-gated Thebes."

There is the evolution of genuine poetry, and such poetry kills Dryden's the moment it is put near it.

Gray's production was scanty, and scanty, as we have seen, it could not but be. Even what he produced is not always pure in diction, true in evolution. Still, with whatever drawbacks, he is alone, or almost alone (for Collins has something of the like



merit) in his age. Gray said himself that "the style he aimed at was extreme conciseness of expression, yet pure, perspicuous, and musical." Compared, not with the work of the great masters of the golden ages of poetry, but with the poetry of his own contemporaries in general, Gray's may be said to have reached, in style, the excellence at which he aimed; while the evolution also of such a piece as his *Progress of Poesy* must be accounted not less noble and sound than its style.

III

ON THE STUDY OF LITERA-  
TURE



III  
ON THE STUDY OF LITERA-  
TURE

THE ANNUAL ADDRESS TO THE STUDENTS OF THE  
LONDON SOCIETY FOR THE EXTENSION OF UNI-  
VERSITY TEACHING, DELIVERED AT THE  
MANSION HOUSE, FEBRUARY 26, 1887

By JOHN MORLEY

MY LORD MAYOR, LADIES, AND GENTLE-  
MEN,

WHEN my friend Mr. Goschen in-  
vited me to discharge the duty  
which has fallen to me this afternoon I  
confess that I complied with very great  
misgivings. He desired me to say  
something, if I could, on the literary  
side of education. Now, it is almost  
impossible — and I think those who

know most of literature will be readiest to agree with me — to say anything new in recommendation of literature in a scheme of education. But, as taxpayers know, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer levies a contribution, he is not a person to be trifled with. I have felt, moreover, that Mr. Goschen has worked with such extreme zeal and energy for so many years on behalf of this good cause, that anybody whom he considered able to render him any co-operation, owed it to him in its fullest extent. The Lord Mayor has been kind enough to say that I am especially qualified to speak on English literature. I must, however, remind the Lord Mayor that I have strayed from literature into the region of politics; and I am not at all sure that such a journey conduces to

the soundness of one's judgment on literary subjects, or adds much to the force of one's arguments on behalf of literary study. Politics are a field where action is one long second-best, and where the choice constantly lies between two blunders. Nothing can be more unlike in aim, in ideals, in method, and in matter, than are literature and politics. I have, however, determined to do the best that I can; and I feel how great an honour it is to be invited to partake in a movement which I do not scruple to call one of the most important of all those now taking place in English society.

What is the object of the movement? What do the promoters aim at? I take it that what they aim at is to bring the very best teaching that the country can afford, through the hands

of the most thoroughly competent men, within the reach of every class of the community. Their object is to give to the many that sound, systematic, and methodical knowledge, which has hitherto been the privilege of the few who can afford the time and money to go to Oxford and Cambridge; to diffuse the fertilising waters of intellectual knowledge from their great and copious fountain heads at the Universities by a thousand irrigating channels over the whole length and breadth of our busy, indomitable land. Gentlemen, this is a most important point. Goethe said that nothing is more frightful than a teacher who only knows what his scholars are intended to know. We may depend upon it that the man who knows his own subject most thor-

oughly, is most likely to excite interest about it in the minds of other people. We hear, perhaps more often than we like, that we live in a democratic age. It is true enough, and I can conceive nothing more democratic than such a movement as this, nothing which is more calculated to remedy defects that are incident to democracy, more thoroughly calculated to raise democracy to heights which other forms of government and older orderings of society have never yet attained. No movement can be more wisely democratic than one which seeks to give to the northern miner or the London artisan knowledge as good and as accurate, though he may not have so much of it, as if he were a student at Oxford or Cambridge. Something of the same kind may be



said of the new frequency with which scholars of great eminence and consummate accomplishments, like Jowett, Lang, Myers, Leaf, and others, bring all their scholarship to bear, in order to provide for those who are not able, or do not care, to read old classics in the originals, brilliant and faithful renderings of them in our own tongue. Nothing but good, I am persuaded, can come of all these attempts to connect learning with the living forces of society, and to make industrial England a sharer in the classic tradition of the lettered world.

I am well aware that there is an apprehension that the present extraordinary zeal for education in all its forms — elementary, secondary, and higher — may bear in its train some evils of its own. It is said that

nobody in England is now content to practise a handicraft, and that every one seeks to be at least a clerk. It is said that the moment is even already at hand when a great deal of practical distress does and must result from this tendency. I remember years ago that in the United States I heard something of the same kind. All I can say is, that this tendency, if it exists, is sure to right itself. In no case can the spread of so mischievous a notion as that knowledge and learning ought not to come within reach of handicraftsmen, be attributed to literature. There is a famous passage in which Pericles, the great Athenian, describing the glory of the community of which he was so far-shining a member, says, "We at Athens are lovers of the beautiful, yet simple in our tastes;

we cultivate the mind without loss of manliness." But then remember that after all Athenian society rested on a basis of slavery. Athenian citizens were able to pursue their love of the beautiful, and their simplicity, and to cultivate their minds without loss of manliness, because the drudgery and hard work and rude service of society were performed by those who had no share in all these good things. With us, happily, it is very different. We are all more or less upon a level. Our object is — and it is that which in my opinion raises us infinitely above the Athenian level — to bring the Periclean ideas of beauty and simplicity and cultivation of the mind within the reach of those who do the drudgery and the service and rude work of the world. And it can be done — do not

let us be afraid — it can be done without in the least degree impairing the skill of our handicraftsmen or the manliness of our national life. It can be done without blunting or numbing the practical energies of our people.

I know they say that if you meddle with literature you are less qualified to take your part in practical affairs. You run a risk of being labelled a dreamer and a theorist. But, after all, if we take the very highest form of all practical energy — the governing of the country — all this talk is ludicrously untrue. I venture to say that in the present Government, from the Prime Minister downwards, there are three men at least who are perfectly capable of earning their bread as men of letters. In the late Government,

besides the Prime Minister, there were also three men of letters, and I have never heard that those three were greater simpletons than their neighbours. There is a Commission now at work on a very important and abstruse subject. I am told that no one there displays so acute an intelligence of the difficulties that are to be met, and the important arguments that are brought forward, and the practical ends to be achieved, as the chairman of the Commission, who is not what is called a practical man, but a man of study, literature, theoretical speculation, and university training. Oh no, gentlemen, some of the best men of business in the country are men who have had the best collegian's equipment, and are the most accomplished bookmen.

It is true that we cannot bring to London with this movement, the indefinable charm that haunts the gray and venerable quadrangles of Oxford and Cambridge. We cannot take you into the stately halls, the silent and venerable libraries, the solemn chapels, the studious old-world gardens. We cannot surround you with all those elevated memorials and sanctifying associations of scholars and poets, of saints and sages, that march in glorious procession through the ages, and make of Oxford and Cambridge a dream of music for the inward ear, and of delight for the contemplative eye. We cannot bring all that to you; but I hope, and I believe, it is the object of those who are more intimately connected with the society than I have been, that every partaker of the bene-

fits of this society will feel himself and herself in living connection with those two famous centres, and feel conscious of the links that bind the modern to the older England. One of the most interesting facts mentioned in your report this year — and I am particularly interested in it for personal reasons — is that last winter four prizes of £10 each were offered in the Northumberland mining district, one each to the male and female student in every term who should take the highest place in the examination, in order to enable them to spend a month in Cambridge in the long vacation for the purpose of carrying on in the laboratories and museums the work in which they had been engaged in the winter at the local centre. That is not a step taken by

our society; but Cambridge University has inspired and worked out the scheme, and I am not without hope that from London some of those who attend these classes may be able to go and have a taste of what Oxford and Cambridge are like. I like to think how poor scholars three or four hundred years ago used to flock to Oxford, regardless of cold, privation, and hardship, so that they might satisfy their hunger and thirst for knowledge. I like to think of them in connection with this movement. I like to think of them in connection with students like those miners in Northumberland, whom I know well, and who are mentioned in the report of the Cambridge Extension Society as, after a day's hard work in the pit, walking four or five miles through cold



and darkness and rough roads to hear a lecture, and then walking back again the same four or five miles. You must look for the same enthusiasm, the same hunger and thirst for knowledge, that presided over the foundation of the Universities many centuries ago, to carry on this work, to strengthen and stimulate men's faith in knowledge, their hopes from it, and their zeal for it.

The progress of the Society has been most remarkable. In 1876 there were, I find, five centres and seven courses. This year there are thirty-one centres and sixty courses. But to get a survey of this movement, you must look not only at London, but at the Oxford and Cambridge societies. You find there that Oxford has twenty-two centres and twenty-nine courses,

and. Cambridge has fifty centres and eighty courses. I say that the thought of all this activity, and all the good of every kind, social, moral, and intellectual, which is being done by means of it, is in the highest degree encouraging, and not only encouraging, but calculated to inspire in every man who has ever felt the love and thirst for knowledge, the deepest interest in the movement and the warmest wishes for its farther success.

Speaking now of the particular kind of knowledge of which I am going to say a few words — how does literature fare in these important operations? Last term out of fifty-seven courses in the Cambridge scheme there were ten on literature; out of thirty-one of our courses, seven were on literature. Well, I am bound to say I think that

that position for literature in the scheme is very reasonably satisfactory. I have made some inquiries, since I knew that I was going to speak here, in the great popular centres of industry in the North and in Scotland as to the popularity of literature as a subject of teaching. I find very much what I should have expected. The professors all tell very much the same story. This is, that it is extremely hard to interest any considerable number of people in subjects that seem to have no direct bearing upon the practical work of everyday life. There is a disinclination to study literature for its own sake, or to study anything which does not seem to have a visible and direct influence upon the daily work of life. The nearest approach to a taste for literature is a certain

demand for instruction in history with a little flavour of contemporary politics. In short, the demand for instruction in literature is strictly moderate. That is what men of experience tell me, and we have to recognise it. I cannot profess to be very much surprised. Mr. Goschen, when he spoke—I think in Manchester—some years ago, said there were three motives which might induce people to seek the higher education. First, to obtain greater knowledge for bread-winning purposes. From that point of view science would be most likely to feed the classes. Secondly, the improvement of one's knowledge of political economy, and history, and facts bearing upon the actual political work and life of the day. Thirdly,—and I am

quite content to take Mr. Goschen's enumeration, — was the desire of knowledge as a luxury to brighten life and kindle thought. I am very much afraid that, in the ordinary temper of our people, and the ordinary mode of looking at life, the last of these motives savours a little of self-indulgence, and sentimentality, and other objectionable qualities. There is a great stir in the region of physical science at this moment, and it is, in my judgment, likely to take a chief and foremost place in the field of intellectual activity. After the severity with which science was for so many ages treated by literature, I cannot wonder that science now retaliates, now mightily exalts herself, and thrusts literature down into the lower place. I only have to say on the

relative claims of science and literature what the great Dr. Arnold said: "If one might wish for impossibilities, I might then wish that my children might be well versed in physical science, but in due subordination to the fulness and freshness of their knowledge on moral subjects. This, however, I believe cannot be; wherefore, rather than have it the principal thing in my son's mind, I would gladly have him think that the sun went round the earth, and that the stars were so many spangles set in the bright blue firmament" (*Stanley's Life of Arnold*, ii. 31). I am glad to think that one may know something of these matters, and yet not believe that the sun goes round the earth. But of the two, I, for one, am not prepared to accept the rather enormous preten-

sions that are nowadays sometimes made for physical science as the be-all and end-all of education.

Next to this we know that there is a great stir on behalf of technical and commercial education. The special needs of our time and country compel us to pay a particular attention to this subject. Here knowledge is business, and we shall never hold our industrial pre-eminence, with all that hangs upon that pre-eminence, unless we push on technical and commercial education with all our might. But there is—and now I come nearer my subject—a third kind of knowledge which, too, in its own way is business. There is the cultivation of the sympathies and imagination, the quickening of the moral sensibilities, and the enlargement of the moral vision. The great

need in modern culture, which is scientific in method, rationalistic in spirit, and utilitarian in purpose, is to find some effective agency for cherishing within us the ideal. That is, I take it, the business and function of literature. Literature alone will not make a good citizen; it will not make a good man. History affords too many proofs that scholarship and learning by no means purge men of acrimony, of vanity, of arrogance, of a murderous tenacity about trifles. Mere scholarship and learning and the knowledge of books do not by any means arrest and dissolve all the travelling acids of the human system. Nor would I pretend for a moment that literature can be any substitute for life and action. Burke said, "What is the education of the gener-



ality of the world? Reading a parcel of books? No! Restraint and discipline, examples of virtue and justice, these are what form the education of the world." That is profoundly true; it is life that is the great educator. But the parcel of books, if they are well chosen, reconcile us to this discipline; they interpret this virtue and justice; they awaken within us the diviner mind, and rouse us to a consciousness of what is best in others and ourselves.

As a matter of rude fact, there is much to make us question whether the spread of literature, as now understood, does awaken the diviner mind. The figures of the books that are taken out from public libraries are not all that we could wish. I am not going to inflict many figures on you, but

there is one set of figures that distresses booklovers, I mean the enormous place that fiction occupies in the books taken out. In one great town in the North prose fiction forms 76 per cent of the books taken out. In another great town prose fiction is 82 per cent; in a third 84 per cent; and in a fourth 67 per cent. I had the curiosity to see what happens in the libraries of the United States; and there — supposing the system of cataloguing and enumeration to be the same — they are a trifle more serious in their taste than we are; where our average is about 70 per cent, at a place like Chicago it is only about 60 per cent. In Scotland, too, it ought to be said that they have what I call a better average in respect to prose fiction. There is a larger demand for


books called serious than in England. And I suspect, though I do not know, that one reason why there is in Scotland a greater demand for the more serious classes of literature than fiction, is that in the Scotch Universities there are what we have not in England — well-attended chairs of literature, systematically and methodically studied. Do not let it be supposed that I at all underrate the value of fiction. On the contrary, I think when a man has done a hard day's work, he can do nothing better than fall to and read the novels of Walter Scott or Miss Austen, or some of our living writers. I am rather a voracious reader of fiction myself. I do not, therefore, point to it as a reproach or as a source of discouragement, that fiction takes so large a place in the

objects of literary interest. I only insist that it is much too large, and we should be better pleased if it sank to about 40 per cent, and what is classified as general literature rose from 13 to 25 per cent.

There are other complaints of literature as an object of interest in this country. I was reading the other day an essay by the late head of my old college at Oxford — a very learned and remarkable man — Mark Pattison, who was a booklover if ever there was one. Now, he complained that the bookseller's bill in the ordinary English middle-class family is shamefully small. He thought it monstrous that a man who is earning £1000 a year should spend less than £1 a week on books — that is to say, less than a shilling in the pound per annum.

Well, I know that Chancellors of the Exchequer take from us 8d. or 6d. in the pound, and I am not sure that they always use it as wisely as if they left us to spend it on books. Still, a shilling in the pound to be spent on books by a clerk who earns a couple of hundred pounds a year, or by a workman who earns a quarter of that sum, is rather more, I think, than can be reasonably expected. I do not believe for my part that a man really needs to have a very great many books. Pattison said that nobody who respected himself could have less than 1000 volumes. He pointed out that you can stack 1000 octavo volumes in a bookcase that shall be 13 feet by 10 feet, and 6 inches deep, and that everybody has that space at disposal. Still the point is not that men should

have a great many books, but that they should have the right ones, and that they should use those that they have. We may all agree in lamenting that there are so many houses — even some of considerable social pretension — where you will not find a good atlas, a good dictionary, or a good cyclopædia of reference. What is still more lamentable, in a good many more houses where these books are, they are never referred to or opened. That is a very discreditable fact, because I defy anybody to take up a copy of the *Times* newspaper — and I speak in the presence of gentlemen well up in all that is going on in the world — and not come upon something in it, upon which they would be wise to consult an atlas, dictionary, or cyclopædia of reference.



I do not think for a single moment that everybody is born with the ability for using books, for reading and studying literature. Certainly not everybody is born with the capacity of being a great scholar. All people are no more born great scholars like Gibbon and Bentley, than they are all born great musicians like Handel and Beethoven. What is much worse than that, many are born with the incapacity of reading, just as they are born with the incapacity of distinguishing one tune from another. To them I have nothing to say. Even the morning paper is too much for them. They can only skim the surface even of that. I go farther, and I frankly admit that the habit and power of reading with reflection, comprehension, and memory all alert

and awake, does not come at once to the natural man any more than many other sovereign virtues come to that interesting creature. What I do submit to you and press upon you with great earnestness is, that it requires no preterhuman force of will in any young man or woman—unless household circumstances are unusually vexatious and unfavourable—to get at least half an hour out of a solid busy day for good and disinterested reading. Some will say that this is too much to expect, and the first persons to say it, I venture to predict, will be those who waste their time most. At any rate, if I cannot get half an hour, I will be content with a quarter. Now, in half an hour I fancy you can read fifteen or twenty pages of Burke; or you can read one of Wordsworth's



masterpieces — say the lines on Tintern; or say, one-third — if a scholar, in the original, and if not, in a translation — of a book of the Iliad or the Æneid. I am not filling the half hour too full. But try for yourselves what you can read in half an hour. Then multiply the half hour by 365, and consider what treasures you might have laid by at the end of the year; and what happiness, fortitude, and wisdom they would have given you for a lifetime.

I will not take up your time by explaining the various mechanical contrivances and aids to successful study. They are not to be despised by those who would extract the most from books. Many people think of knowledge as of money. They would like knowledge, but cannot face the

perseverance and self-denial that go to the acquisition of it, as they go to the acquisition of money. The wise student will do most of his reading with a pen or a pencil in his hand. He will not shrink from the useful toil of making abstracts and summaries of what he is reading. Sir William Hamilton was a strong advocate for underscoring books of study. "Intelligent underlining," he said, "gave a kind of abstract of an important work, and by the use of different-coloured inks to mark a difference of contents, and discriminate the doctrinal from the historical or illustrative elements of an argument or exposition, the abstract became an analysis very serviceable for ready reference" (Veitch's *Life of Hamilton*, 314, 392). This assumes, as Hamil-

ton said, that the book to be operated on is your own, and perhaps is rather too elaborate a counsel of perfection for most of us. Again, some great men—Gibbon was one, and Daniel Webster was another, and the great Lord Strafford was a third—always before reading a book made a short, rough analysis of the questions which they expected to be answered in it, the additions to be made to their knowledge, and whither it would take them. I have sometimes tried that way of steadying and guiding attention; I have never done so without advantage; and I commend it to you. I need not tell you that you will find that most books worth reading once are worth reading twice, and—what is most important of all—the masterpieces of literature are worth reading

a thousand times. It is a great mistake to think that because you have read a masterpiece once or twice, or ten times, therefore you have done with it. Because it is a masterpiece, you ought to live with it, and make it part of your daily life. Another practice which I commend to you is that of keeping a commonplace book, and transcribing into it what is striking and interesting and suggestive. And if you keep it wisely, as Locke has taught us, you will put every entry under a head, division, or sub-division.<sup>1</sup> This is an excellent practice

<sup>1</sup> "If I would put anything in my Common-place Book, I find out a head to which I may refer it. Each head ought to be some important and essential word to the matter in hand" (Locke's *Works*, iii. 308, ed. 1801). This is for indexing purposes, but it is worth while to go further and make a title for the passage extracted, indicating its pith and purport.

for concentrating your thought on the passage and making you alive to its real point and significance.

Various correspondents have asked me to say something about those lists of a hundred books, that have been circulating through this universe within the last few months. I have examined some of these lists with considerable care, and whatever else may be said of them—and I speak of them with great deference and reserve, because men for whom I have a great regard have compiled them—they do not seem to me to be calculated either to create or satisfy a wise taste for literature in any very worthy sense. To fill a man with a hundred parcels of heterogeneous scraps from the *Mahabharata*, and the *Sheking*, down to *Pickwick* and

White's *Selborne*, may pass the time, but I don't think it would strengthen or instruct or delight. For instance, it is a mistake to think that every book that has a great name in the history of books or of thought is worth reading. Some of the most famous books are least worth reading. Their fame was due to their doing something that needed in their day to be done. The work done, the virtue of the book expires. Again, I agree with those who say that the steady working down one of these lists would end in the manufacture of that obnoxious product—the prig. A prig has been defined as an animal that is overfed for its size. I think that these bewildering miscellanies would lead to an immense quantity of that kind of overfeeding. The object of

reading is not to dip into everything that even wise men have ever written. In the words of one of the most winning writers of English that ever existed — Cardinal Newman — the object of literature in education is to open the mind, to correct it, to refine it, to enable it to comprehend and digest its knowledge, to give it power over its own faculties, application, flexibility, method, critical exactness, sagacity, address, and expression. These are the objects of that intellectual perfection which a literary education is destined to give. I will not venture on a list of a hundred books, but will recommend you to one book well worthy of your attention. Those who are curious as to what they should read in the region of pure literature, will do well to

peruse my friend Mr. Frederic Harrison's volume, called *The Choice of Books*. You will find there as much wise thought, eloquently and brilliantly put, as in any volume of its size and on its subject, whether it be in the list of a hundred or not.

Let me pass to another topic. We are often asked whether it is best to study subjects, or authors, or books. Well, I think that is like most of the stock questions with which the perverse ingenuity of mankind torments itself. There is no universal and exclusive answer. It is idle. It was put to me that I should say something on it. My answer is a very plain one, and it is this. It is sometimes best to study books, sometimes authors, and sometimes subjects ; but at all times it is best to study authors, sub-



jects, and books in connection with one another. Whether you make your first approach from interest in an author or in a book, the fruit will be only half gathered if you leave off without new ideas and clearer lights both on the man and the matter. One of the noblest masterpieces in the literature of civil and political wisdom is to be found in Burke's three pieces on the American War — his speech on Taxation in 1774, on Conciliation in 1775, and his letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol in 1777. I can only repeat to you what I have been saying in print and out of it for a good many years, and what I believe more firmly as observation is enlarged by time and occasion, that these three pieces are the most perfect manual in all literature for the study of great

affairs, whether for the purpose of knowledge or action. "They are an example," as I have said before now, "an example without fault of all the qualities which the critic, whether a theorist or an actor, of great political situations should strive by night and by day to possess. If their subject were as remote as the quarrel between the Corinthians and Corcyra, or the war between Rome and the Allies, instead of a conflict to which the world owes the opportunity of the most important of political experiments, we should still have everything to learn from the author's treatment; the vigorous grasp of masses of compressed detail, the wide illumination from great principles of human experience, the strong and masculine feeling for the two great political ends of

Justice and Freedom, the large and generous interpretation of expediency, the morality, the vision, the noble temper." No student worthy of the name will lay aside these pieces, so admirable in their literary expression, so important for history, so rich in the lessons of civil wisdom, until he has found out something from other sources as to the circumstances from which such writings arose, and as to the man whose resplendent genius inspired them. There are great personalities like Burke who march through history with voices like a clarion trumpet and something like the glitter of swords in their hands. They are as interesting as their work. Contact with them warms and kindles the mind. You will not be content, after reading one of these pieces,

without knowing the character and personality of the man who conceived it, and until you have spent an hour or two — and an hour or two will go a long way with Burke still fresh in your mind — over other compositions in political literature, over Bacon's civil pieces, or Machiavelli's *Prince*, and others in the same order of thought. That is my answer to the question whether you should study books, subjects, or authors. This points to the right answer to another question that is constantly asked. We are constantly asked whether desultory reading is among things lawful and permitted. May we browse at large in a library, as Johnson said, or is it forbidden to open a book without a definite aim and fixed expectations? I am for a compromise. If a man has once got

his general point of view, if he has striven with success to place himself at the centre, what follows is of less consequence. If he has got in his head a good map of the country, he may ramble at large with impunity. If he has once well and truly laid the foundations of a methodical, systematic habit of mind, what he reads will find its way to its proper place. If his intellect is in good order, he will find in every quarter something to assimilate and something that will nourish.

Now I am going to deal with another question, with which perhaps I ought to have started. What is literature? It has often been defined. Emerson says it is a record of the best thoughts. "By literature," says another author, I think Mr. Stopford Brooke, "we mean the written thoughts

and feelings of intelligent men and women arranged in a way that shall give pleasure to the reader." A third account is that "the aim of a student of literature is to know the best that has been thought in the world." Definitions always appear to me in these things to be in the nature of vanity. I feel that the attempt to be compact in the definition of literature, ends in something that is rather meagre, partial, starved, and unsatisfactory. I turn to the answer given by a great French writer to a question not quite the same, viz., "What is a classic?" Literature consists of a whole body of classics in the true sense of the word, and a classic, as Sainte-Beuve defines him, is an "author who has enriched the human mind, who has really added to its

treasure, who has got it to take a step farther; who has discovered some unequivocal moral truth, or penetrated to some eternal passion, in that heart of man where it seemed as though all were known and explored; who has produced his thought, or his observation, or his invention under some form, no matter what, so it be great, large, acute, and reasonable, sane and beautiful in itself; who has spoken to all in a style of his own, yet a style which finds itself the style of everybody,—in a style that is at once new and antique, and is the contemporary of all the ages." At a single hearing you may not take all that in; but if you should have any opportunity of recurring to it you will find this a satisfactory, full, and instructive account of what is a

classic, and will find in it a full and satisfactory account of what those who have thought most on literature hope to get from it, and most would desire to confer upon others by it. Literature consists of all the books—and they are not so many—where moral truth and human passion are touched with a certain largeness, sanity, and attraction of form. My notion of the literary student is one who through books explores the strange voyages of man's moral reason, the impulses of the human heart, the chances and changes that have overtaken human ideals of virtue and happiness, of conduct and manners, and the shifting fortunes of great conceptions of truth and virtue. Poets, dramatists, humorists, satirists, masters of fiction, the great preachers, the character-



writers, the maxim-writers, the great political orators — they are all literature in so far as they teach us to know man and to know human nature. This is what makes literature, rightly sifted and selected and rightly studied, not the mere elegant trifling that it is so often and so erroneously supposed to be, but a proper instrument for a systematic training of the imagination and sympathies, and of a genial and varied moral sensibility.

From this point of view let me remind you that books are not the products of accident and caprice. As Goethe said, if you would understand an author, you must understand his age. The same thing is just as true of a book. If you would comprehend it, you must know the age. There is an order; there are causes

and relations. There are relations between great compositions and the societies from which they have emerged. I would put it in this way to you, that just as the naturalist strives to understand and to explain the distribution of plants and animals over the surface of the globe, to connect their presence or their absence with the great geological, climatic, and oceanic changes, so the student of literature, if he be wise, undertakes an ordered and connected survey of ideas, of tastes, of sentiments, of imagination, of humour, of invention, as they affect and as they are affected by the ever changing experiences of human nature, and the manifold variations that time and circumstances are incessantly working in human society.

It is because I am possessed, and

desire to see others possessed, by that conception of literary study, that I watch with the greatest sympathy and admiration the efforts of those who are striving so hard, and, I hope, so successfully, to bring the systematic and methodical study of our own literature, in connection with other literatures, among subjects for teaching and examination in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. I regard those efforts with the liveliest interest and sympathy. Everybody agrees that an educated man ought to have a general notion of the course of the great outward events of European history. So, too, an educated man ought to have a general notion of the course of all those inward thoughts and moods which find their expression in literature. I think that in

cultivating the study of literature, as I have rather laboriously endeavoured to define it, you will be cultivating the most important side of history. Knowledge of it gives stability and substance to character. It gives us a view of the ground we stand on. It gives us a solid backing of precedent and experience. It teaches us where we are. It protects us against imposture and surprise.

Before closing I should like to say one word upon the practice of composition. I have suffered, by the chance of life, very much from the practice of composition. It has been my lot, I suppose, to read more unpublished work than any one else in this room, and, I hope, in this city. There is an idea, and, I venture to think, a very mistaken idea, that you cannot

have a taste for literature unless you are yourself an author. I make bold entirely to demur to that proposition. It is practically most mischievous, and leads scores and even hundreds of people to waste their time in the most unprofitable manner that the wit of man can devise, on work in which they can no more achieve even the most moderate excellence than they can compose a Ninth Symphony or paint a Transfiguration. It is a terrible error to suppose that because you relish "Wordsworth's solemn-thoughted idyll, or Tennyson's enchanted reverie," therefore you have a call to run off to write bad verse at the Lakes or the Isle of Wight. I beseech you not all to turn to authorship. I will go further. I venture with all respect to those who are

teachers of literature, to doubt the excellence and utility of the practice of over-much essay-writing and composition. I have very little faith in rules of style, though I have an unbounded faith in the virtue of cultivating direct and precise expression. But you must carry on the operation inside the mind, and not merely by practising literary deportment on paper. It is not everybody who can command the mighty rhythm of the greatest masters of human speech. But every one can make reasonably sure that he knows what he means, and whether he has found the right word. These are internal operations, and are not forwarded by writing for writing's sake. I am strong for attention to expression, if that attention be exercised in the right way. It has

been said a million times that the foundation of right expression in speech or writing is sincerity. It is as true now as it has ever been. Right expression is a part of character. As somebody has said, by learning to speak with precision, you learn to think with correctness; and firm and vigorous speech lies through the cultivation of high and noble sentiments. I think, as far as my observation has gone, that men will do better for reaching precision by studying carefully and with an open mind and a vigilant eye the great models of writing, than by excessive practice of writing on their own account.

Much might here be said on what is one of the most important of all the sides of literary study. I mean

its effect as helping to preserve the dignity and the purity of the English language. That noble instrument has never been exposed to such dangers as those which beset it to-day. Domestic slang, scientific slang, pseudo-aesthetic affectations, hideous importations from American newspapers, all bear down with horrible force upon the glorious fabric which the genius of our race has reared. I will say nothing of my own on this pressing theme, but will read to you a passage of weight and authority from the greatest master of mighty and beautiful speech.

"Whoever in a state," said Milton, "knows how wisely to form the manners of men and to rule them at home and in war with excellent institutes, him in the first place, above others, I should esteem worthy of all honour. But next to him the man who strives to estab-



lish in maxims and rules the method and habit of speaking and writing received from a good age of the nation, and, as it were, to fortify the same round with a kind of wall, the daring to overleap which let a law only short of that of Romulus be used to prevent. . . . The one, as I believe, supplies noble courage and intrepid counsels against an enemy invading the territory. The other takes to himself the task of extirpating and defeating, by means of a learned detective police of ears, and a light band of good authors, that barbarism which makes large inroads upon the minds of men, and is a destructive intestine enemy of genius. Nor is it to be considered of small consequence what language, pure or corrupt, a people has, or what is their customary degree of propriety in speaking it. . . . For, let the words of a country be in part unhandsome and offensive in themselves, in part debased by wear and wrongly uttered, and what do they declare, but, by no light indication, that the inhabitants of that country are an indolent, idly yawning race, with minds already long prepared for any amount of servility? On the

other hand, we have never heard that any empire, any state, did not at least flourish in a middling degree as long as its own liking and care for its language lasted." <sup>1</sup>

The probabilities are that we are now coming to an epoch, as it seems to me, of a quieter style. There have been—one of them, I am happy to think, still survives—in our generation three great giants of prose writing. There was, first of all, Carlyle, there was Macaulay, and there is Mr. Ruskin. These are all giants, and they have the rights of giants. But I do not believe that a greater misfortune can befall the students who attend classes here, than that they should strive to write like any one of these three illustrious men. I think it is the worst thing that can happen

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Bonmattei, from Florence, 1638.

to them. They can never attain to it. It is not everybody who can bend the bow of Ulysses, and most men only do themselves a mischief by trying to bend it. We are now on our way to a quieter style. I am not sorry for it. Truth is quiet. Milton's phrase ever lingers in our minds as one of imperishable beauty,—where he regrets that he is drawn by I know not what, from beholding the bright countenance of truth in the quiet and still air of delightful studies. Moderation and judgment are more than the flash and the glitter even of the greatest genius. I hope that your professors of rhetoric will teach you to cultivate that golden art—the steadfast use of a language in which truth can be told; a speech that is strong by natural force, and not

merely effective by declamation; an utterance without trick, without affectation, without mannerisms, and without any of that excessive ambition which overleaps itself as much in prose writing as it does in other things.

Now, ladies and gentlemen, I will detain you no longer. I hope that I have made it clear that we conceive the end of education on its literary side to be to make a man and not a cyclopædia, to make a citizen and not a book of elegant extracts. Literature does not end with knowledge of forms, with inventories of books and authors, with finding the key of rhythm, with the varying measure of the stanza, or the changes from the involved and sonorous periods of the seventeenth century down to the *staccato* of the nineteenth

century, or all the rest of the technicalities of scholarship. Do not think I condemn these. They are all good things to know, but they are not ends in themselves. The intelligent man, says Plato, will prize those studies which result in his soul getting soberness, righteousness, and wisdom, and he will less value the others. Literature is one of the instruments, and one of the most powerful instruments, for forming character, for giving us men and women armed with reason, braced by knowledge, clothed with steadfastness and courage, and inspired by that public spirit and public virtue of which it has been well said that they are the brightest ornaments of the mind of man. Bacon is right, as he generally is, when he bids us read not to contra-

dict and refute, nor to believe and take for granted, nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh and to consider. Yes, let us read to weigh and to consider. In the times before us that promise or threaten deep political, economical, and social controversy, what we need to do is to induce our people to weigh and consider. We want them to cultivate energy without impatience, activity without restlessness, inflexibility without ill-humour. I am not going to preach to you any artificial stoicism. I am not going to preach to you any indifference to money, or to the pleasures of social intercourse, or to the esteem and good-will of our neighbours, or to any other of the consolations and the necessities of life. But, after all, the thing that matters most, both for

happiness and for duty, is that we should habitually live with wise thoughts and right feelings. Literature helps us more than other studies to this most blessed companionship of wise thoughts and right feelings, and so I have taken this opportunity of earnestly commending it to your interest and care.

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